SPEAK NOW: MEMORIES OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA
RECORDING SESSIONS

Rev. (Dr.) Amos Brown

Moderated by LeAnna Welch

Friday, May 27, 2011

William Winter Archives and History Building

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Scope Note: The Mississippi Department of Archives and History in conjunction with the 50th Anniversary of the Freedom Rides and to complement the Department's exhibit *"Freedom Rides: Journey for Change"* conducted recording sessions with local citizens to gather oral memories of the Civil Rights Era. The participants were also given the opportunity to have their photograph taken in front of the exhibit. The recordings were conducted in the spring and summer of 2011 at the William F. Winter Archives and History Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

WELCH: Speak Now recording number 009. This is LeAnna Welch, with the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Today's date is Friday, May 27, 2011. Now sharing his Civil Rights era memories is Reverend Amos Brown. Welcome.

BROWN: Thank you.

WELCH: So what would you like to leave with us today?

BROWN: Well, when it comes to history and records of what human-kind has done, it's always a case of…not everything being recorded that was done, and secondly, who's doing the telling of the story. That's the reason why African-American history week that used to be was so necessary because in overall American history, unfortunately historians elected to just ignore African-Americans, to use the words of one noted writer, "We were invisible people in this country." And even during the course of the celebration of the Freedom Rides…a lot of history was left out, in terms of what local African-Americans and their allies did and that's not to discredit at all what the Freedom Riders did. When you look at the Freedom Riders, the distinction of their involvement was that it reflected an effort on, on the part of James Forman, CORE, and an aggregation of Whites who demonstrated that they were concerned, and that was admirable. But to tell the whole story, African-Americans who were here living the oppression of Mississippi 24/7, I don't think they've gotten a fair hearing or reporting. Case in point is that when it comes to youth activism of the Civil Rights Era, or more than the Civil Rights Era…you had to go back to 1955, before the Freedom Riders came. It just so happened that…I was here.

I remember very vividly when Emmett Till's body was discovered on August 28, 1955. I picked up that Jet Magazine and saw this grotesque, mutilated, horrifying image of a human being. That terrorized me as a child. I was the same age as Emmett Till was. And when that happened, the thing that triggered in for me was what my Sunday school teacher at Farish Street Baptist Church, Essie Randal, told me one Sunday morning when she asked me did I know what my name meant and I told her, "No." She said "Your name in Hebrew means Amos, the prophet who bears the burdens of the people." And when I saw that picture of Emmett Till, I said to myself, "I guess that what the teacher meant." I was going to have to bear the burden of my people, the legacy and the memory of Emmett Till, and the pain of his mother.

And, from that experience I, through the influence of my sister who had already gone to Dallas, Texas earlier with Medgar Evers to the National NAACP Convention, must have been 1954. She came back home and she was talking about this slogan that she heard. The slogan was, "Free by '63." It was coined by Dr. Channing H. Tobias who was chairman of the board of

NAACP. And he threw out the notion that certainly by 1963, the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation, that maybe we would be well on our way toward dealing with this problem of race in America, and that really the Supreme Court decisions of May 17, ‘54 would bring about a change. So when Gloria told me that we had work to do to make sure this happened, I inquired of her what did we have to do and she said, “Well one thing we gotta do is organize a youth council.” There was no youth council in Jackson. And I, in 1955, organized the first youth council of NAACP and was later elected state president of all youth councils in the state of Mississippi.

Shortly after we organized in 1955, Medgar Evers came to my home one day and asked my mother if he could take me to San Francisco to the National Convention of NAACP and my mother was the type of mother who didn't smother her children with too much protection. She gave us freedom to exercise our gifts, and she conceded that I could go. That was my first time in the Western United States. Mr. Evers had just bought a '55 Oldsmobile, and he along with Mrs. Lou Ella Bender, who was the daughter of Reverend W. A. Bender who was a Civil Rights activist going back to the thirties and he wrote many letters to the then executive secretary of NAACP Walter White, reporting on lynchings in the South, and particularly in Mississippi and he…was also college minister at Tougaloo College. But Lou Ella—back to my point—was in that car with us, and Mrs. Della Irving who was the adviser of the college chapter of NAACP unit in—at—Grambling College in Louisiana—Grambling, Louisiana.

Well, we got to San Francisco, the first week of July 1956. And on that Wednesday night of the convention, I first heard Martin Luther King, Jr. I never shall forget, when he concluded his paration, he said he had the dream that the day would come when all of God's children from bass black to treble white would be significant on the Constitution's keyboard, and I was very impressed with what he had to say in terms of the substance of his speech, I was only 15 years old then. We came back to Jackson, from the inspiration of that meeting, where we had the opportunity of meeting with young people from all over the country. Among them was one person, Donald Payne, who is now is in the U. S. Congress of New Jersey, and there were youth there from Dallas, Texas that I met, Tommy Till, and Ms. Clara Luper, who was then the adviser of the Oklahoma City Youth Council. Herbert Wright was the National Youth Field Secretary of NAACP. He was at that meeting, naturally. It was at that meeting, which under the umbrella of NAACP Youth Units—1956—that we began to discuss and strategize on what issues we were going to take action on, whether it was in public accommodations, dealing with disparages in educational opportunities, or even trying to break down segregation in houses of worship. When I came back, my assignment was to deal with the disparages in education. The group from Oklahoma would deal with public accommodations.

I went to the National Convention of NAACP in Detroit, Michigan in 1957, and later, in the year of l958 I was also at the convention, never shall forget that—particularly the '58 convention—because Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Broadwater, Mrs. Broadwater is still living; she's a member of Farish Street Baptist Church, and Medgar Evers and I rode to Cleveland together, and while at the convention in Cleveland, a reporter of the Cleveland Plain Dealer interviewed me regarding quality of education for Blacks in Mississippi and the disparages in salaries for teachers, black teachers up against Whites. And I didn't hold back at all. I told him what I felt, about there not being equality of opportunity, about the fact that we had to read from used textbooks, if we played in the band, we got used instruments, young ladies who studied home economics had to work on used stoves, everything second class. I said very directly to her, "There's nothing equal about educational opportunities for Blacks in Mississippi." Someone was there who was a spy for the State Sovereignty Commission, I was unaware of this, but we knew we were being observed and how dangerous things were. But someone sent to the superintendent of schools Kirby P. Walker, a copy of that interview, and when he read it, he called Mr. James Goodman who was then superintendent of quote, unquote "the Black schools," to tell Mr. Goodman that he had better meet with Mr. Luther James Marshall, who was principal of Jim Hill High School and deal with Amos Brown because I didn't know how to keep my mouth shut. And that summer of 1958 I was invited to go to a youth camp in Michigan. I didn't immediately come back home, and before I got back, my mother called and told me that Mr. Marshall, the principal of Jim Hill, had called and told her that I would not be admitted back to Jim Hill High School because of pressure that he had gotten from Mr. Goodman and Mr. Walker. When Medgar Evers heard about it, he consulted with my mother. Reverend G. R. Horton who was at Pearl Street A. M. E. Church, Reverend S. Leon Whitley who was pastor of Farish Street, Medgar Evers, and my mother met with Mr. Marshall. And Mr. Marshall tried to keep Mr. Evers at bay by telling him that it was a parent-student issue, and it was none of NAACP's business. But Mr. Evers insisted that it was NAACP business, and so they were told by Mr. Marshall, "Well, we're sorry. Amos cannot come back to Jim Hill High School" and, mind you, this was a segregated high school. They were keeping me out only because I told the truth. But the thing that shocked them was that my mother—my father was away at the National Baptist Convention at that time—but he was aware of what was going on. They were shocked to hear that my mother, Mr. Evers, and the delegation had agreed that we were going to file a suit for the desegregation of Provine High School, if they didn't let me back in Jim Hill. Naturally they didn't want to hear that because they were still fighting integration now, though mind you, the Supreme Court had rendered a decision May 17, 1954 that segregation in public education was unconstitutional. So, long story short, they decided to admit me back to Jim Hill, but, in order to cut my influence,

they abolished the Student Council and they did that because I was president of the Student Council, they wanted to break my influence in the school, and after they had cut my influence there, the students had elected me president of my senior class, and Mrs. Amy High was the adviser and I never shall forget the day that the word got to Mr. Marshall that the students had elected me president and Mr. Marshall, I'm sure he was just stressed and frustrated over it all, ‘cause pressure was being put on him—he was a decent person, I knew him. He was church clerk at my church Farish Street and…sang bass in the choir. My father knew his father and he was in a very difficult spot, but he yelled at Mrs. High and said, “Didn't I tell you that Brown was not to be involved in any leadership position?” and Mrs. High broke down and cried right in my presence. I did eventually finish Jim Hill, in 1955—9—and I was salutatorian, but actually everyone told me that I was valedictorian, but again they wanted to cut my influence.

I went on to Morehouse College and entered there. And when I went to Morehouse, I had only 87 dollars in my pocket. Room and board in those days cost about 950 dollars, and I was determined to go to Morehouse because I had been influenced greatly by Dr. B. B. Dansby who was also a deacon in College Hill Church, a church that I later joined when my parents moved on the west side of town and, Mr. Dansby was also president of Jackson College at one time, but he very much influenced me and then in my meeting Martin Luther King was very influential, so I was determined to go to Morehouse, and I went to Morehouse and finished there. But between being a student at Morehouse, that didn't stop my activism. I was elected national chair of the Youth Work Committee of NAACP in l959. It was at that meeting that a young boy named Ezella Blair, from Greensboro was there as an alternate youth delegate. He heard in the meeting that I was presiding over the young people from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma reporting on their successes in 1958, same as I got involved in 1958 talking about segregation in schools here and inequities in educational opportunities. These young people sat down August of 1958 and broke down segregation in lunch counters in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. There were other youth councils in Wichita, Kansas and Louisville, Kentucky. Now that's the actual true story of the sit-in movement. Sit-ins didn't start in Greensboro, North Carolina in l960. They started from the influence and inspiration that Ezella Blair got from the reportings of the youth from NAACP Youth Units in Oklahoma City, Kansas, and Kentucky. He went back to Greensboro that fall of '59 entering ANT as a freshman as I was entering Morehouse as a freshman, and decided he was going to do what these kids did in Oklahoma, but he couldn't get anyone to go with him to sit down…that fall. But February the first, 1960, he got three other freshmen to go with him and the rest of it is history. That's the accurate history that the established press did not tell. And, what the youth did in Oklahoma in '58 was written up in the London Times, Tokyo Times, New York Times, around the world. But the American press decided that they were going to squash it, kill it. But we

didn't stop there, and the spring semester of 1961, when the Freedom Riders got involved through James Forman's desire to engage CORE in the forefront of the struggle by testing the Supreme Court decision, breaking down segregation in, in interstate travel, CORE did a commendable thing of testing the decision. And when they came to Atlanta, they wanted Martin Luther King to join them. But Dr. King was already engaged at Morehouse, at the advice of Dr. Benjamin Mays, his spiritual and intellectual mentor, to come aside and do some teaching and reflecting, particularly after this trumped up charge was against him about his income tax. They arrested him, and he was put in prison, outside of Atlanta in Reidsville Georgia State Penitentiary, and they eventually did release him on probation. So that when the Freedom Riders got to Atlanta, Dr. King was in the midst of teaching this course in Social Philosophy that I was chosen among seven other students by the school to sit at Dr. King's feet to pick his brain and to…go to the next level in the struggle and Dr. King was committed to that seminar so that when the Freedom Riders got to Atlanta, he gave a reception for them, but he did not join them. He finished the semester. I finished the semester. He joined them in Montgomery. When they got to Montgomery and they had this mass meeting at First Baptist Church, the church that his friend, Ralph Abernathy pastured, a White mob gathered that night, and they were getting ready to bomb that church and Dr. King is the one who picked up the phone and called Bobby Kennedy and told him the gravity of the situation, and they got marshals there, National Guard, to protect these people in this mass meeting.

In the meantime, I was on a Greyhound bus by myself, coming back to Jackson to join up with the Freedom Riders. But when I got here on May the seventh, many of them had been arrested and they were in the process of taking them up to Parchman. And so, I was about to go to the station, too, but Medgar Evers said, “Amos, I need you here on the ground…to lead the youth of the NAACP units.” And when he made the appeal for me to, to help him, I organized the youth and we went to Livingston Park. You couldn't even sit on the benches and look at the monkeys and the elephants with White people in that day, and we were arrested there.

Later that same summer of '61, I was arrested at the hospital out there—I think it was on Woodrow Wilson—University of Mississippi Medical Center, and would you believe that a young White doctor called my 85 year old neighbor whom I had accompanied to the emergency room, a boy. And when he yelled and called him a boy, I said to him, “Wait. This is a man not a boy. And you're gonna respect him, not call him a boy.” And he said to me, “I know what it is,” and I retorted, “Well, you insisted on calling him a boy or an “it” which is a byproduct of stupidity.” And when I said that, he told one of the nurses, “Call the cops. Call the cops. This is one of these smart niggers, we gotta deal with him.” And when the arresting officers came, I believe it was Chief of Police Ray then, who saw me and knew that

I had been involved in the Movement, and he asked one of the officers—other officers—"Well, what did he do this time?" and he told him what happened. He said, "Well, let's arrest him on disturbing the peace and using profane language in public." And when Medgar Evers heard about it, he was later interviewed by the Pittsburgh Courier newspaper—the Black paper in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—and he gave the response that "you are profaned in Mississippi if you even open your mouth to a White person. And you're disturbing the peace even if you open your mouth." And they got me bonded out of jail. And I continued leading youth throughout the Southeast region in activities during that summer of '61 and '60. Even I was involved in breaking down segregation at Tybee Beach, Georgia where you couldn't even go on the beach of Whites. I led demonstrations at First Baptist Church here. Ross Barnett was a member there and taught Sunday school, even he and other deacons and the pastors didn't have enough love of Jesus in their hearts to permit Blacks come in there and to worship.

I feel that at this stage, having gone through that history, that the more things change the more they stay the same, when it comes to this issue of race in America. The other morning we were over at the Governor's Manse and I was called on to give some remarks after the governor had again given his apology. And I very graciously and respectfully said to him that we appreciated his words of apology, it showed humility, showed some courage and compassion, but I remind him and the audience that this issue of race has been in the DNA of this country, and I went on to use the analogy that last year I suffered a minor stroke because strokes are in the DNA of my family tree. My father had hypertension and diabetes, and his oldest brother had a stroke, the brother next to him, who was also a preacher, had a stroke. My sister Gloria had quadruple bypass and two valves replaced. So I said I suffered this stroke because it's in my DNA. But through therapeutic sessions—physical therapy, psychological therapy too—I'm on my way to great recovery, and I said that racism is in the DNA of this country. America was built on race. Scholars like de Gobineau, Chamberlain and others from the old country gave into the intellectual respectability to the notion that Blacks were inferior to Whites and I went on to say, too, in another forum, after we left there that that very manse that Governor Barbour lives in was built by slaves, the city hall here was built by slaves, the U. S. Congress was built by slaves, the White House was built by slaves, and this represented public policy. So that it's not…sane or sensible for anybody to suggest that though Mr. Barack Obama is in the White House, as the first Black president, that we live in a post racial society. Racism is still in our DNA. How so? In the state of Mississippi we have a flag that represents a symbol…of terrorism, of killings, of pain, and an unequal society. And to think that this state still has not gotten rid of that flag, shows that we need more therapeutics teams to help us get past this issue of race. When dealing with this issue I remember years ago people said, "You can't force this integration down people's throat. You got to be

gradual, you got to go slow…" but Martin Luther King said "The time is always right to do right." And I raise the question of how much time do we need? We had already too much time. In 1903 W. E. B. DuBois said that the problem of the 20th century would be the color line. In 1944 Gunnar Myrdal, Swedish sociologist wrote a book entitled "The American Dilemma" and I t said that because of this thing of race, America was showing itself to be schizophrenic. We preach one thing and did another. A professor up at Queen's College, Andrew Hacker wrote a book called "Two Nations: Unequal, Divided, Hostile." He was a White sociologist again talking about this issue of race. Bill Clinton during his administration tried to get America to support a commission on race to get us talking about the issue, but that commission was derailed. And then when you look at the way that the established media is treating Mr. Barack Obama as president, I contend that there are a lot of racial overtones with the way he's treated. Though any president generally may have people that differ with him, but to have somebody like O'Reilly making an issue on Fox News about Obama on Easter Sunday morning going to Shiloh Baptist Church—Black Baptist church in Washington D. C.—to worship and saying that he was dividing the nation and sitting at the feet of a preacher who mentioned in his sermon that his grandson was a symbol of resurrection and hope because his forbearers—or ancestors—were considered three fifths human in the Constitution, which is true. Now Mr. Obama and Fox News, owned by Garnum—by Rupert Murdoch…Murdoch—excuse me. They've always pushed racist programs and statements to try to get Whites of the red state riled up. And when I was invited to respond to Mr. Obama's going to Shiloh after Fox News had done what I saw coming as another attempt to bring out another issue similar to that of Jeremiah Wright before Mr. Obama was elected, saying that Mr. Obama you know had a pastor who preach racist rhetoric and all that nonsense, it was un-American. But when he tried to get airborne with that issue and they had me to respond, I simply said to Mr. O'Reilly, "Mr. O'Reilly, I have a question for you. Did you not know that…Ronald Reagan, Nancy Reagan, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton thought so highly of Shiloh Baptist Church that they too went to church there, and sat to hear a sermon preached by the same pastor, Wallace Charles Smith?" And he was flabbergasted 'cause he didn't know that I knew all that kinda history about that church and that I knew the pastor personally, so I stopped him right in his tracks. Then the next thing he did was he raises the question about did I think that Donald Trump's comments about, if Barack would stay off the basketball court and deal with the economy maybe he would be able to get the country back on track, so to speak. Again I raised a question to him, I didn't jump on him, I said "Mr. O'Reilly, I have another question for you. Do you not also know that the sociologist says 'We are basically creatures of our culture'?" And I said, "Unfortunately, we do live in a culture in which African American males have been depicted and branded as only having the option of succeeding as an athlete, not as a scientist, doctor, lawyer, or businessperson, but as an

athlete. To shoot hoops or to run a football…on the gridiron." I said "Yes, I do think there were some racist overtones to Mr. Trump's statement."

So, what I'm saying is that, getting back to my point after giving all these examples of the fact that we still need therapy. I told the governor we need treatment. We need help. But we're still sick and not well, as long as we have that flag, as long as you have a state like Mississippi where the Black population is about 37, 38 percent but of the inmates in this prison industrial complex, 67 to 68 percent of 'em are black. And also Mississippi is the lowest, possibly competing with Arkansas, in terms of academic educational achievement. And if we spend more money and time and energy on training everybody, black and white, we just might find somebody who will discover a cure for AIDS, a cure for cancer, or even make it doable for us to go to Mars and hang around there, and live with the Martians. It only hurts us to continue to push this dichotomous thinking of them against us, us against them, race against race, and even genders against genders. This thing of chauvinism still has to be addressed, that's one of the next frontiers in the human and Civil Rights Movement, and also this thing of gay bashing is another issue. And I have to say to a lot my African American colleagues and ministers and friends, it is hypocritical for us to jump up and down and jump on White people about their racist attitudes and treating us wrong because of the color of our skins and turn around and be mean to gays and lesbians because they're different. I'm a heterosexual. I'm at home with my sexuality. I don't perform same sex marriages. Why? Because it's not a part of my religious tradition. But that's what makes America, America. We have freedom of religion. But for those people who want to perform same sex marriages they have the same right under the Constitution's clause of equal protection under the law. And that's the reason why I stand with Mr. Obama. That's the reason why I stood against Proposition Eight in California where I live. Because again, we are being mean to people who have been marginalized in this country because they were…different.

So that comes back to Jackson. Back home, to the city where I was born at 128 East Cohea Street. Went to elementary school at Smith Robertson, high school at Jim Hill, baptized at Farish Street Baptist Church, licensed to preach at College Hill Baptist Church. As I come back here, I hope that maybe God will give me the time and the strength to tell the whole story about what happened here in this city in which all people were involved, Freedom Riders, NAACP, CORE, faith community, and people such as Essie Randal who cooked many meals for Freedom Riders over at Farish Street Baptist Church. So that's my little story, that they can't tell the whole story without including this dimension of the civil and human rights struggle in the state of Mississippi and Jackson, my hometown.

WELCH: Thank you.

BROWN: Allright.

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